

'If you put this to a climate test, it would fail,' expert says of pipeline, increased oil sands production

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Body

VANCOUVER—The Trans Mountain pipeline expansion project — or any project that could increase oil sands production — will make it increasingly unlikely that we'll meet our climate targets, says a UBC climate scientist who wants the federal government to start levelling with Canadians.

The political math might look good that we can build a pipeline, support the oil sands and still meet our climate targets, said Simon Donner, a climatologist at the University of British Columbia.

"All I'm saying, as somebody who studies this stuff for a living, is the actual math doesn't work," he said. "If you put this to a climate test, it would fail."

The federal government announced this week that it would buy the Trans Mountain pipeline and expansion project for \$4.5 billion to ensure the new pipeline gets built.

The project, according to federal Finance Minister Bill Morneau, would create thousands of construction jobs and ensure a fair price for Canadian oil.

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While government modelling from December shows Canada was not on track to meet its 2030 commitments based on the initiatives in place as of September 2017, the federal government has committed to meeting its targets and said the pipeline won't prevent that.

In a statement, Caroline Th#233;riault, a spokesperson for federal Environment Minister Catherine McKenna said, "the project fits within our government's commitment to tackle climate change, create jobs and be a leader in the transition to a low carbon economy."

"Modelling shows that Canada's clean growth and climate action plan gets us on track to our target after factoring in the impacts of the Trans Mountain expansion and a growing oil and gas sector," she added.

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But Donner said meeting those targets would go from “quite unlikely” to “almost impossible” if the pipeline is built. He said he understands the political trade-offs at play, but he wants the government to “be upfront with Canadians” about the costs of the project beyond the \$4.5 billion price tag.

In 2016, Canada emitted 704 megatonnes of greenhouse gasses and oil and gas across the country accounted for 26 per cent. Under the Paris Agreement, the government committed to reduce overall emissions to 517 megatons or 30 per cent below 2005 levels.

As part of its review of the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion, the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency examined the potential emissions from increased oil sands production resulting from the additional transport capacity the pipeline would provide.

The agency found that the pipeline could result in 13 to 15 megatons of greenhouse gasses from new oil production. That's equal to two per cent of Canada's overall emissions in 2016 or between 21 and 25 per cent of B.C.'s total reported emissions for the same year.

At minimum, Donner said, the pipeline would “lock in” the current level of oil sands production and possibly lead to an increase.

The industry itself is predicting a major bump in production over the 12 years.

The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers forecasted a 53 per cent increase in oil sands production between 2016 and 2030, said Elisabeth Besson, a spokesperson for the organization, in a statement.

But “innovation can break the link between energy growth and emissions growth,” she said, adding that substantial emission reductions have already and will continue to be achieved across the sector.

Donner said it's true the industry is acting, but there's only so much efficiency they can achieve.

The Alberta government has also imposed a cap on oil sands emissions of 100 megatons. It leaves room for the industry's emissions to grow by 30 megatons.

Donner said the issue isn't continued oil production, it's expanding an industry that's contrary to long-term climate goals.

The federal government is giving preferential treatment to one industry and making the challenge in other industries harder by building the Trans Mountain pipeline and allowing increased oil sands production, he said.

Statements from spokespersons for both McKenna and Alberta Premier Rachel Notley's office pointed to a number of green initiatives their governments have brought in to reduce emissions. The federal government has invested in transit, green infrastructure, cleaner fuels and low-carbon innovation, Th#233;rault said.

Notley's government has brought in to reduce emissions, including ending pollution from coal-generated electricity, cutting emissions, and developing more renewable energy, said Shannon Greer in a statement.

Still, Donner said the best-case scenario is that Canada barely meets its 2030 target.

But to achieve the longer-term targets the international community is aiming for in the face of catastrophic climate change, Donner said, “we need to be running past home base.”

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